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## Reflexive practice in teacher education: facts and trends

Mihaela Monica Stîngu\*

*Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, P.O. 050656, Romania*

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### Abstract

Reflexive practice has long been a concern in professional practice. However, there has been little research into its evolution as a practice in teacher education. This paper explores the reflexive practice strategies used in teacher education and examines the ways in which it has been used in order to develop the teachers' capacity to reflect on their own practice and how they can overcome difficulties through this type of practice. The purpose of this study is to identify key challenges that may arise and propose means to meet them.

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**Keywords:** reflexive practice; teacher education; reflective teaching; professional identity

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### 1. Introduction

In order to better understand reflexive practice strategies used in teacher education and examine the ways in which this method has been used and improved to develop the teachers' capacity to reflect on their own practice it is necessary to state a common understanding of what reflexive practice represents.

Two of the most influential theorists in the area of reflexive practice, Dewey (1933) and later Schön (1983), have provided a foundation for currently understanding the notion of reflection. Dewey(1933) defined reflexive practice as an action that involves 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads' (p. 9). Schön (1983) made the distinction between reflection 'in action'- kind of reflection that occurs whilst a problem is being addressed, and 'on action'- that takes place after the event, it's consciously undertaken and documented. Eraut (1995), criticizing Schön's notion of reflection 'in action', contributed to the literature on reflection by introducing the concept of reflection 'for action', which adds a more prospective value to reflection. That is why Eraut proposes to redefine the key

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0040724804884;  
E-mail address: [mihaela.stingu@gmail.com](mailto:mihaela.stingu@gmail.com).

prepositions so that 'in' refers to context, 'on' refers to focus and 'for' refers to purpose. Taking all these in consideration we will narrow down our area of investigation and focus on reflexive practice in teacher education.

In what teaching is concerned, like many other professions, we may state that it is a highly complex and skilled practice. While teachers' professional competences are formally recognised with accreditation, the notion of being a teacher is socially legitimised through the accredited teachers' interactions with other teachers, parents, students and other persons involved in the educational process (Coldron & Smith, 1999). The second type of 'accreditation' stated before, translates itself in the development of the professional identity as a teacher.

In practical terms, we may state that developing the professional identity means the deconstruction, construction and reconstruction of the teachers' assumptions of his/hers profession through their everyday interactions, as Gouldner (1970) said 'There is no knowledge of the world that is not a knowledge of our own experience of it and in relationship to it' (p. 28). In the view of all these, we start to see the teacher as a reflective practitioner which, through a process that involves interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences, gains knowledge about the teaching profession and develops his/hers professional identity as a teacher.

## **2. Evolution of reflexive practice in teacher education**

Reflexive practice in teacher education is without any doubt a wide area of investigation. This is why we will try to focus on some aspects that we consider that are important in order to better understand the evolution of this practice and to identify the challenges that may arise and propose means to meet them.

### *2.1. From pre-teaching identity to teacher identity*

Teachers should have sufficient incentives throughout their careers to review their practice, learning needs and to acquire new knowledge, skills and competences (European Commission, 2010). In order to achieve the goals stated by the European Commission, reflexive practice is being used in initial and in-service teacher education to enhance teachers' capacity of self-observation, self-analysis and self-evaluation.

In what teacher education is concerned, the construction of the professional identity begins in the initial teacher education, as preservice teachers make the transition from student to accredited teacher. In this context, a question may arise: On what do preservice teachers reflect upon and through which means do they develop their professional identity as teachers? Flores and Day (2006) identify the preservice period as a pre-teaching identity through which student's professional identity arises from their student images of teachers, their initial beliefs and concepts of what represents a good teacher. Through the processes of reflection, the pre-teaching identity is refined as the preservice teachers develop higher understanding of their work as teachers, through the educational experiences in their formal studies in universities and their work in schools (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005).

### *2.2. Stages of reflexive practice in teacher education*

There is a consensus between different authors (Brookfield, 1994; Fook, 2010; Mezirow, 1990) that there are extra steps between reflection and critical reflection that involve more than thinking about our experiences. Engaging in critical reflection means that teachers have to both understand their experiences in the social context and also to understand how they can use that knowledge to develop their practice in

the future. This is what Eraut (1995) referred to when he stated the importance not only of the reflection in and on action, but more important the one of reflection ‘for action’.

By moving from reflection to critical reflection, teachers move from analyzing a single aspect of a lesson to considering the ethical, social and political implications of teaching practice (Larrivee, 2008). From other perspective, Fook (2010) suggested that critical reflection involves both theory and practice and explained that the ‘critical’ in critical reflection involves reflection through the lens of critical theory. However, not everyone consider that reflection and critical reflection are desirable practices and react to the term ‘critical’. To overcome this boundary, Thompson and Thompson (2008), who analysed the similarities between reflection and critical reflection, explained that their use of the term ‘critical’ was used in the context of understanding the depths of practice, rather than to focus on the negative interpretations of the term.

Larrivee (2008) defined, based on an extensive review of literature, four levels of reflection:

- Pre-reflection – represents the ‘zero’ level of reflection in which teachers react to students and classroom situations automatically, without conscious consideration of alternatives
- Surface reflection – teachers’ reflections focus on strategies used to reach predetermined goals
- Pedagogical reflection – teachers reflect on educational goals, theories underlying approaches, and connections between theoretical principles and practice
- Critical reflection – teachers reflect on moral and ethical implications and consequences of their classroom practice on students

In general, reflexive practice is viewed as evolving in stages, although an individual teacher’s evolution is not necessary linear. Teachers may reflect at different levels simultaneously, questioning different areas of their practice.

### **3. Note of caution in using reflexive practice in teacher education**

Analyzing and trends of reflexive practice in teacher education we were able to see how this practice has developed over time. In order to better understand how is going to evolve in the future we have to identify the challenges that may arise and propose means to meet them.

As stated before, preservice teachers develop higher understanding of their work as teachers, through the educational experiences in their formal studies in universities and their work in schools. Even though, there is a mismatch between knowledge and understanding of teaching, developed in two different contexts: formal coursework undertaken at university or at other teacher education institutions and practicum experiences in schools (Flores & Day, 2006).

This is why, taking also in consideration the fact that reflexive practice is a complex process in developing the professional identity of teachers, a challenge arises: reflections of preservice teachers tend to be more descriptive than those of experienced teachers, failing to connect theoretical framework to day to day issues that may arise. This challenge appears mostly from the discrepancies in the knowledge basis and organization cultures between schools and teacher education institutions. In order to overcome these discrepancies, it is necessary to develop better coordination between the various strands of teacher education – from initial education to in-service professional development, through additional early career support (induction programmes). Of most relevance for this purpose, the ‘induction phase must be seen as a measure of shared interest and benefit of the newly qualified teacher, the workplace and the teacher education institution and therefore needs to take place in close cooperation between those three stakeholders’ (European Commission, 2010).

One of the main challenges when using this practice in teacher education is, as stated by Korthagen & Wubbels (1995), that reflection is a concept simply ‘too big, too vague, and too general for everyday application’ (p. 53). This is why we consider that without carefully constructed guidance teachers may be

unable to engage in critical reflection in order to improve their practice. Taking this in consideration we can identify two means to meet this challenge: constant support from a specialist or facilitator and providing tools to assess teachers' level of reflective practice. As we mentioned before, reflection is an abstract construct and a teacher's capacity to reflect is embedded in values, assumptions and expectations. A valid and effective tool to assess teachers' level of reflection should provide some indicators of key behaviours, attitudes and practices of a reflective teacher. Without any doubt this kind of tool must be developed according not only to the stage that a teacher is in (preservice, novice or in service), but also to the ongoing changes in the society and the cultural aspects of the school environment.

Another caution that needs to be taken in consideration is the 'overuse' of reflection in teacher education programmes. Following similar lines, Brockbank and McGill (1998) warned that the overuse of self-reflection may result in people being seduced by their own stories and beliefs and therefore, are not able to critically analyse their assumptions. In other words, we can argue that what they see is what they are looking for (Hickson, 2011). This can be a substantial issue and it can lead to the situation in which teachers 'pay more attention to the outcomes of reflection rather than to the process itself' (Mena Marcos, Sánchez Miguel & Tillema, 2009, p.13). One way to meet this challenge is by constantly assessing both the needs and the learning styles of the teachers which may fit this kind of approach.

When taking in consideration using this practice in teacher education and development we have to analyse the social context and the organizational culture of the school in which it will take place. That is why we propose that reflexive practice should be viewed as a situated practice, enabled by teachers' participation in diverse school contexts. It is necessary for this to be taken in consideration because certain contexts may be too conducive for reflection to take place. For example, it may be very difficult for a teacher to engage in critical reflection if the school management is one of control, rather than a permissive environment.

#### 4. Conclusions

The evidence suggests that reflexive practice tends to be widely used in teacher education. This enables us to agree upon the fact that it is an effective practice and that it brings a range of benefits to those who practise it. Even though reflexive practice is undoubtedly a remarkable way to develop the teachers' capacity to reflect and improve their own practice, its evolution in the future may be 'threatened' by the challenges that may arise in the future. Taking this in consideration we may state that it is utterly necessary to analyse these challenges or risks in order to be able to manage them. That is why it is important to take a note of caution every time we consider using reflexive practice in teacher education programmes.

However, further research needs to be carried out in order to find ways to improve reflexive practice in teacher education and to keep it up to date in a field that is continuously changing.

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